



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

JOHN ESTEN COOKE AS A NOVELIST

It is now seventy-five years since the birth of John Esten Cooke, fifty years since the appearance of his first novel, and almost twenty years since his death. Within the half century which has just closed, his fame grew, flourished, and declined; within the thirty years of his literary life it rose to its highest, and, as has been the case in the lives of many quickly-successful men, the author himself lived to see its rapid diminishment.

Perhaps the most widely known and most popular novelist the South has ever had was this man, John Esten Cooke. In his early work imitative to some degree, in his later productions hasty unto negligence, he nevertheless possessed qualities that lifted him high above the common run of fiction writers and made him, at his best, the companion of Irving and Cooper. In not a few ways he resembles these two men; for he united in his writings the gentler traits of the one with the more strenuous character of the other. A love of lingering description and the charm of wild activity were in him well mingled.

He was born at Winchester, Virginia, in 1830 and like his brother, Philip Pendleton Cooke, the author of "Florence Vane," enjoyed exceptional advantages in mental endowment, environment, and opportunities for general culture. The father, John Rogers Cooke, was in his day the strongest lawyer in his part of the State, and the son, having chosen the same profession, might easily have gained a lucrative practice. But John Esten Cooke had none of the father's love for the court-room, and, although he did indeed open an office, he used it mainly for the writing of poems and fiction. We may fairly say that he gained precious little from his vocation but much from his avocation. At the age of twenty-four he had become rather widely known through some of his fiction, especially "Leather Stocking and Silk" and "Virginia Comedians." At length he gave up entirely the attempt to be both lawyer and writer, and henceforth his whole time was devoted to literature. With the outbreak of war he entered the Confederate army and during the last years of the campaign was Inspector General of the horse artillery of the Army of Northern Virginia. Paroled at the surrender, he

once more returned to the quiet but industrious life that he so much preferred.

Of course, as a Virginian, Cooke wrote of the beloved mother of States. That it was indeed beloved may be inferred from his words concerning his home: "I would rather pass my time quietly here at 'The Briars' in the beautiful Valley of the Shenandoah than rule a nation." From his first to his last novel, the trend of his efforts never varied. "His aim was to paint the Virginia phase of American society, and to do for the 'Old Dominion' what Cooper had done for the Indians, what Hawthorne had done for the Puritans, what Simms had done for South Carolina, and what Irving had done for the Dutch."

Like most American novelists, he wrote much that has perished. Some of his stories are not read to-day; some are not even heard of; but when all this is said, there remain for posterity such permanent works as "Virginia Comedians," "Stories of the Old Dominion," "Surry of Eagle's Nest," "Henry St. John, Gentleman," and "Hilt to Hilt." These, by their vividness, their forceful characters, and the very power of their movement, will not soon pass away.

It has been mentioned that there is in him a love of lingering description. How he delights in the scenes of colonial days,—the horse-racing, the stately dances, the contests between fiddlers, the barbecues, and all the other quaint elements of that curiously hearty but cultured society! For an evidence of this, note but a few lines from a description of a horse-race in the "Virginia Comedians:"

As the day draws on, the crowd becomes more dense. The splendid chariots of the gentry roll up to the stand, and group themselves around it, in a position to overlook the race-course, and through the wide windows are seen the sparkling eyes and powdered locks, and diamonds and gay silk and velvet dresses of those fair dames who lent such richness and picturesque beauty to the old days, dead now so long ago in the fair past. The fine-looking old planters, too, are decked in their holiday suits, their powdered hair is tied into queues behind with neat black ribbon, and they descend and mingle with their neighbors, and discuss the coming festival.

Gay youths in rich brilliant dress, caracole up to the carriages on fiery steeds, to display their horsemanship, and exchange compliments with their friends, and make pretty speeches, which are received by the bright-eyed damsels with little ogles and flirts of their variegated fans and rapturous delight.

. . . There are gay parties of the yeomen and their wives and daughters, in carry-alls and wagons filled with straw, upon which chairs are placed. There are rollicking fast men . . . who whirl in, in their curricles . . . There are horsemen who lean forward, horsemen who lean back; furious, excited horsemen, urging their steeds with whip and spur; cool, quiet horsemen who ride erect and slowly; there are, besides, pedestrians of every class and appearance, old and young, male and female, black and white—all going to the races.

Thus he takes the quaint phases of the old life, of the Virginia life when it was in its bloom, when Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, the Randolphs, the Lees, and a host of others whose names are household words, lived and wrought for the nation. True to nature, as he saw it, he is picturesque at all times.

Whether he is always true to life is an open question; for the stricture is too frequently true of him, as of those he unconsciously imitated, that "wizards, gloomy barons, French dancing masters, fair young maidens, lamias, Christian big-Injuns, savage half-breeds, secret panels, mysterious packages, thunder, duelling, and desperation are thrown into the cauldron, stirred with a pen, and sauced with genuine love for the grand old Blue Ridge and romantic Massanutten." That he does love wild scenes cannot be denied; the healthy blood of a new race is in him. Yet the spirit that rushes and swirls in many of his narratives is higher than that of mere violence. Thus in "The Virginia Bohemians," the description of a fight with the moonshiners has a dramatic quality that mere bombast and sensationalism can never impart. The moonshiners have barricaded themselves in a narrow mountain-pass; the militia have found them:

"Halt!" the lieutenant's voice was heard shouting, as he whirled his light saber. "Form column in rear!—I'll soon attend to this."

The men stopped and fell into column again, just beyond range of the fire of the barricade.

"Dismount and deploy skirmishers! Advance on both flanks and in front! I'll be in the centre."

. . . Then, at the ringing "Forward" . . . they closed in steadily, firing as they did so on the barricade.

. . . Nature was pitiless and serene; the red crowns were rising peacefully from the summits of the trees; a crow was winging his way toward the summit on slow wings; it was a scene to soothe dying eyes if the light needs must disappear from them.

In ten minutes it had disappeared from more than one on both sides . . . The crack of the sharp-shooters was answered from behind the barricade,

and the gorge was full of smoke and shouts as the assailants closed in . . . In the shadowy gorge the figures were only half seen as the light faded, and the long thunder of the carbines and shouting rolled through the mountain, awaking lugubrious echoes in the mysterious depths.

However weak in some respects Cooke may be, he is an admirable character-builder. In his earlier work he was in full sympathy with Cooper and Simms in that he had great admiration for the "natural" man. In his first volume, "Leather Stocking and Silk" (1854) the leading figure is Hunter John Myers, a hugh, rough, yet wholesome and pure man, uncultured but admirable in strength and manliness. But he does not fail to see the beauty of which the cultured soul is capable, and therein, especially in his portrayal of the gentle yet courageous spirit of woman, he far surpasses Cooper. Few indeed are the female characters in American fiction more lovable and more touchingly pictured than Beatrice Hallam, the actress, in "Virginia Comedians." For another instance of this mingling of strength and elegance, the strongest of all his characters, Henry St. John, is worthy of praise. Using large canvas for his portrayals of society, the characters that he creates are distinct, vivid and intensely living.

His faults, it has been hinted, are plain. He too often lapses into sentimentality; he sometimes mistakes bravado for bravery; he is tainted with sensationalism; he is often too romantic; he does not at all times face squarely the sterner phases of life; he is frequently in haste; he forgets, in his interest in the tale, the demands of art. And, in spite of it all, his work is good. The words of praise bestowed upon "Virginia Comedians" might be applied most justly to others of his many volumes: "The whole book is redolent of youth and poetic susceptibility to the beauties of nature, the charms of women, and the quick movement of life." He is ever cheerful; hope never leaves him. Even in "Surry of Eagle's Nest," written in 1866, when the South was one vast field of wretchedness and despair, there is the same strong call for courage and a belief in a future victory. Such a writer could not have come at a more needful time.

Why, then, has his fame diminished? The question is answered in his own words: "Mr. Howells and the other realists have crowded me out of the popular regard as a novelist, and

have brought the kind of fiction I write into general disfavor. I do not complain of that, for they are right. They see, as I do, that fiction should faithfully reflect life, and they obey the law, while I was born too soon and am now too old to learn my trade anew. But in literature, as in everything else, advance should be the law, and he who stands still has no right to complain if he is left behind." Such indeed is the cause of his neglect. He was essentially a romanticist, not a realist. He did not write to prove theories; he was simply a teller of stories. Unlike the later fiction, his tales do not blindly follow where a merciless destiny leads them; for he at all times considers it best that his characters should "live happy ever afterwards."

Perhaps if the *people* were asked, it would be found that the human heart still hungers for such a story. Perhaps they would say with Burne-Jones: "Don't lend me any sad stories—no, not if they are masterpieces. I cannot afford to be made unhappy . . . There would be a beautiful woman in it—all that is best in woman, and she would be miserable and love some trumpery frip (as they do) and die of finding out that she had been a fool—and it would be beautifully written and full of nature and just like life, and I couldn't bear it. These books are written for the hardhearted, to melt them into a softer mood for once before they congeal again—as much music is written—not for poets but for stockjobbers, to wring iron tears from them for once; that is the use of sorrowful art, to penetrate the thick hide of the obtuse . . . Look! tell me it ends well and the two lovers marry and are happy ever afterwards, and I'll read it gratefully."

CARL HOLLIDAY.

The State Normal School, Jacksonville, Alabama.